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ABSTRACT

The paper, originally given at a 1986 Ethnic and Multicultural Symposium, reviews the language demands of schools and difficulties with conventional language proficiency measures in predicting the academic achievement of language minority children. It is suggested that language assessment include the assessment of syntactic competencies as well as discourse abilities. Research on discourse structure is reviewed indicating seven types of narrative story structures. Story construction is seen as having potential in determining the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance. (DB)

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Understanding School Language Proficiency Through the Assessment of Story Construction

Vicki A. Jax

Language is critical to achievement in school. It is important for basic interpersonal communication, but schooling requires a special set of institutionalized behaviors (Michaels & Collins, 1984) for autonomous or self-directed language tasks including speaking, reading, and writing. Yet, the literate competencies used as the standard of performance in the schools are closely tied to oral language competencies (Olson, 1982; Tannen, 1980). Mastery of grammatical language structures and mastery of discourse, how to combine and interpret both meanings and language forms, are critical competencies of language proficiency. For reading as for speaking, strategies are mapped onto underlying meaning (Olson, 1982). The strategies a child develops for accomplishing mapping begin in interpersonal communication and evolve to literate language use in self-directed academically oriented tasks. Relying on the acquisition of a literature style of interpersonal communication in the home, schools have typically assumed the responsibility for teaching reading and writing (Olson, 1982), as opposed to emphasizing speaking and understanding the language of schools. Results of an assessment of school language proficiency through the use of story construction tasks indicate the discourse structures used by the child in an autonomous, academically oriented task, as well as the oral or literate characteristics of the child's style of production.

LANGUAGE DEMANDS OF SCHOOLING

Research and clinical practice with children learning English as a second language have led to increased concern about the relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement (Ulibarri, Spencer, & Rivas, 1981). This issue is of particular concern because of rapidly increasing language minority populations (Bureau of Census, 1984); federal mandates to identify, assess, and place language minority children in instructional environments commensurate with their level of English language proficiency (Office of Civil Rights, 1977); and numbers of language minority children receiving special educational services (Cummins, 1982; Mercer, 1973).

Language minority children typically achieve at lower levels than majority children (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1971; Brown, Rosen, Hill, & Olivas, 1980), and differences in achievement are especially noted in language related areas (Coleman et al., 1966; Gordon, 1968; Okada, Cohen, & Mayeske, 1969; Rueda, Cardoza, Mercer, & Carpenter, 1985). However, relatively little is known about the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance. Although it has been suggested that low academic achievement, particularly in language related areas, is due to language minorities students' difficulties in higher level information processing (Peal & Lambert, 1962), it is more likely that poor

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academic achievement is related to English language proficiency for academic use (Cummins, 1979).

A special set of institutionalized language behaviors, that is, a range of literate strategies, is required in school (Michaels & Collins, 1984), including development of a literate style of information presentation in the spoken and written mode of communication. Literate discourse strategies of school language use are for communication with an audience that is relatively unfamiliar to the child. As such, relevant background information must be provided in communication. Literate devices are used to signal thematic cohesion. Further, organization of the progression of extended texts is required for effective communication. Information conveyed through nonlexical channels in oral style discourse must be made explicit through the choice of lexical items and syntactic construction (Collins & Michaels, 1980; Gee, 1985; Michaels, 1981).

A communicative viewpoint on language proficiency offers a multidimensional framework that incorporates both an interpersonal communication dimension and an autonomous language dimension (Canale, 1983, 1984; Duran, Canale, Penfield, Stansfeld, & Liskin-Gasparro, 1985) and is a useful model for the assessment of school language. The communicative language dimension involves the social interpersonal uses of language (other-directed language production) through both spoken and written channels. The autonomous language dimension includes intrapersonal uses of languages (e.g., in problem solving, organizing one's thoughts).

There are four types of knowledge and competence areas involved in each dimension of language proficiency. These areas are grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale, 1983, 1984; Canale & Swain, 1980; Duran et al., 1985). Considering the influence of competence areas on communicative proficiency, grammatical forms and literal meanings receive less emphasis than the social meaning of language. In self-directed, autonomous language proficiency, both grammatical and discourse competence are more highly involved than sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. The production and comprehension of literate-style spoken and written discourse are involved in the development of autonomous language behaviors. While self-directed language is imperative in language-related academic areas, the production and comprehension of the text structures of discourse are particularly important to achievement in reading.

DISCOURSE STRUCTURE

Discourse is a type of structure that exists in both spoken and written forms and involves communication of meaningful relations across sentence boundaries (Tannen, 1982). While meaning is certainly conveyed within individual sentences, discourse focuses on the structure of meaning that supercedes sentences and that pervades the text. The interpretation of any sentence is dependent upon the interpretation of other sentences within the text (van Dijk, 1980), since meaning of a total discourse is more than what can be interpreted from the sum of the meanings in the individual words and sentences (Westby, 1984). Thus, the text structure influences the meaning taken by the reader (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

Narrative is one type of discourse with particular relevance for academic language. Narrative discourse has been described in terms of high points (Labov, 1972; Labov, Cohen, Robins, & Lewis, 1968; Labov & Waletzky, 1967), episodes (Glenn, 1978; Mandler, 1978; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1977; Schank & Abelson, 1977; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Thorndyke, 1977), and plot units (Botvin & Sutton-Smith, 1977; Sutton-Smith, 1981). High points described in a narrative are critical points to which the story line builds in the recapitulation of an event and from which resolution of the problem occurs. An episode consists of an event that causes a protagonist either to set a goal or respond to the situation, and is terminated by resolution of the activity (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). A plot unit delimits the action within the narrative through representation of the motivation for the action, subsequent

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action, and resolution (Botvin & Sutton-Smith, 1977). Stories typically represent narrative discourse in either spoken or written form. As such, they reflect the transformation of experience and depend on the use of informational units to recapitulate an event (Labov, 1972). In representing events, narrative discourse stories establish causal, temporal, and motivational relationships between people, things, and events.

The following seven types of narrative story structures emerged in the collaborative research of Glenn and Stein (Peterson & McCabe, 1983).

1. Descriptive sequences provide a description of character(s), setting, and habitual activity without indication of causal relationships.
2. Action sequences provide a chronological list of actions with no indication of causal relationships.
3. Reactive sequences indicate a circumstance that automatically causes change in a state of affairs with no planning.
4. An abbreviated episode presents the goals of the protagonist, but his/her planning is not indicated.
5. A complete episode provides evidence of planning in the description of purposive activity. Further, the complete episode must include consequences as well as two narrative components, i.e., events, motivating states, or attempts.
6. A complex episode provides elaboration of the complete episode by either embedding or multiple plan application.
7. An interactive episode describes the goals and attempts of two characters who influence each other and provides complete episodes from the perspective of each character.

These story patterns are considered logically ordered from the least to the most complex. Each level of complexity includes all of the functional and content categories of the level before and all of the relationships between those categories.

Narrative discourse structures are useful when considering the mastery of language behaviors on a continuum of oral-literate language competencies. In that regard, assessment of discourse behaviors in the spoken mode is important for understanding a child's development of school language, and approaches to the language proficiency testing deserve review.

APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTING

Language proficiency tests represent a major source of information on which placement and instructional recommendations are made, and adequate performance on such tests results in placement in the regular classroom (Merino & Spencer, in press). Conventional language proficiency tests typically measure the syntactic proficiency of the language minority child. While this aspect of proficiency has been considered indicative of ability to communicate in the English language community, the value of syntactic proficiency as predictive of ability to function in classrooms where English is the language of instruction has been questioned (Cummins, 1979). Results of recent research with over 1,300 Hispanic children indicated that large numbers of language minority children who had passed conventional language proficiency tests did not achieve in the regular classroom and were referred for special education evaluation. The primary reasons for referral were low academic achievement, poor reading skills, and poor oral skills (Rueda, Cardoza, Mercer, & Carpenter, 1985). These findings suggest that proficiency instruments utilized in the diagnostic and placement process were not sensitive to the skills necessary to achieve in the English language classroom.

Since syntactic measures of language proficiency have not functioned as predictors of academic achievement, additional measures of language proficiency must be considered. One option is the evaluation of language use in the construction of spoken stories. Assessment of story construction should be a better predictor of performance on reading comprehension since

organizational features of storytelling guide the individual in the construction of functional relationships between elements of a narrative. Further, the organizational features utilized in story construction guide to the comprehension of stories constructed by others, by activating cues presented in spoken or written stories. Ability to recognize and recall information from text is also dependent upon the availability of an organizing system.

Given the apparent relationship between spoken story construction and comprehension of written text, it is important to determine the relative effectiveness of conventional and story construction measures of language proficiency in predicting reading comprehension. One such measure of story construction is a modified language sampling procedure that allows the child to demonstrate English proficiency in story formulation. The storytelling task is typical of the literate style of interaction in the regular classroom—that is, the child is asked to tell a story about a book in which the story is presented only pictorially. While storytelling occurs interpersonally in conversation and/or oral interview, a mode of storytelling can be used in which the child produces a story independent of discourse cues provided in conversation. Based on spoken language samples, analysis of story construction can provide information on story setting, initiation of events, reaction, attempts, outcomes, and endings. Additionally, the type of story structure produced in the construction of narrative can be classified. The seven classifications of story structures (sequences and episodes) which emerged in the collaborative research of Glenn and Stein (Peterson & McCabe, 1983) are (a) descriptive sequences, (b) action sequences, (c) reactive sequences, (d) abbreviated episode, (e) complete episode, (f) complex episode, and (g) interactive episode.

Language performance assessed through story construction relates to reading comprehension with certain expectations. Those children who use descriptive sequences in their story construction have an organizational framework for comprehending setting information in text. Similarly, those children who formulate reactive sequences in story construction employ organizational frameworks for processing information on circumstances that automatically cause change in the state of affairs. Those children who formulate episodes (abbreviated, complete, complex, or interactive) employ organization frameworks that account for goals, plan applications, and temporal and causal relationships. It is predicted that children who achieve a higher level on the story construction tasks will achieve higher scores in reading comprehension than children who achieve lower story construction levels. Further, it is expected that story construction scores will be more predictive of reading comprehension level than conventional language proficiency scores.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The implications of such research are important for educators, psychologists, and speech and language personnel. Their role in the public schools demands reconsideration of diagnostic strategies for evaluating the language use of minority children. In light of information about language use for academic purposes, it is necessary to consider language samples for the information they provide on a child's construction of stories, in addition to information on the individual's phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic proficiency. In the case of children learning English as a second language who are not succeeding in the regular classroom, appropriate diagnostic decisions and educational recommendations can be made only after language assessment that accounts for the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance. In the assessment of language proficiency as it relates to academic learning, the use of language sampling strategies that lead to the analysis of story construction can assist school personnel in the determination of special needs of language minority children.

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